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The USSR and the Third World: Continuity and Change under Gorbachev

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In the 1970s and early 1980s, Soviet policy in the Third World contributed significantly to American disillusionment with détente. Attempts to improve the relationship between the USSR and the US remain vulnerable to unilateral moves by either on the periphery. The study of Soviet policy in the Third World is essential to appraising prospects for improvement of the Soviet-American relationship in the Gorbachev era.

Some Western analysts in the field continue to argue that there has been no sign of significant change in Soviet perspectives and policy in the Third World.¹ Others accept that there is growing evidence of a plurality of opinion in the Soviet literature and considerable evolution of Soviet thinking, but that this has yet to be reflected significantly in policy.² Another group of experts thinks that Soviet behavior has changed; but, they say, these reforms are merely tactical and temporary, reflecting a phase of consolidation which will be followed by a return to adventuristic expansion.³ A final argument holds that both Soviet commentary and practice have

become significantly more moderate and cautious and that the changes are profound and enduring.⁴

The Legacy of the 1960s

The first years of the Brezhnev/Kosygin era in the mid-1960s were marked by a number of conspicuous failures in Soviet policy in the Third World. Most notably, many of the principal beneficiaries of Soviet largesse disappeared in coups d'état, among them Ghana's Nkrumah, Indonesia's Sukarno, Algeria's Ben Bella and Mali's Keita. This brought a substantial retreat from Khrushchevian optimism and generosity. Soviet writers questioned the tendency of national liberation revolutions to move in the direction of socialism. They openly doubted the progressive credentials of bourgeois nationalists and played down the significance of Third World events in the world revolutionary process.⁵ Instead, Soviet commentators held that the domestic economic development of the USSR played the most significant part in the cause of

1 See R. Staar, *Soviet Foreign Policy after Détente* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1986).

2 See, for example, H. Gelman, "The Soviet Union in the Less Developed World," in A. Korbonski and F. Fukuyama, *The Soviet Union and the Third World: The Last Three Decades* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

3 This appeared to be the most widely shared view at a conference on Soviet Policy in the Third World sponsored by the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington D.C. in December, 1987.

4 See E. Valkenier, *The USSR and the Third World: An Economic Bind* (NY: Praeger, 1985); and J. Hough, *The Struggle for the Third World* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1986).

5 See, for example, N. Simoniia, "O kharaktere natsional'no-osvoboditel'noi revoliutsii," *Narody Azii i Afriki* (1966), #6; M. Suslov, "O bor'be KPSS za splochnost' mezhdunarodnogo kommunisticheskogo dvizheniya," *Pravda* (April 3, 1964); G. Kim and A. Kaufman, "Non-capitalist development: achievements and difficulties," *International Affairs* (1967), #12, pp.72-73; K. Brutents, "African revolution: gains and problems," *International Affairs* (1967), #1, pp.25, 27-28; R. Ul'yanovskiy, "Osvoboditel'naya bor'ba narodov Afriki," *Kommunist* (1969), #11, pp.38, 42.



world revolution.⁶ These changes in theory were accompanied by a reduction in resources devoted to the Third World and a concentration of those that remained in the Middle East and Vietnam. The diplomatic focus shifted to strategically important countries of whatever ideological orientation. The best example lies in Soviet military assistance to the conservative Nigerian regime in its civil war against Biafra.

On this basis, many in the West assumed in the early 1970s that the USSR was becoming more realistic, pragmatic, and modest in its objectives and policies. The "Soviet problem" had become more manageable.⁷ But a number of developments in the early and mid-1970s smashed these expectations. In particular, the USSR displayed an increasing willingness to use force.

Activism in the 1970s

The USSR had not deployed its own forces in considerable numbers in the Third World since World War II. At that time, Soviet forces occupied Northern Iran in order to secure lines of supply from ports in the Persian Gulf. Under the protection of the Soviets, local communists and sympathizers established autonomous regimes in Iranian Kurdistan and Azerbaijan. Soviet forces stayed in Iran beyond the deadline for withdrawal of allied forces. Ultimately they left only under substantial American and United Nations pressure, and in return for an Iranian promise of oil concessions. Once they had left, however, the Iranians reneged.

The Soviets had never deployed substantial forces in non-contiguous states, and until the 1970s they lacked the means to do so. In 1969, however, Moscow dispatched over ten thousand Soviet air defense personnel, including combat pilots, to Egypt during the War of Attrition. Israel, having attained complete command of the air, was bombing Egyptian targets with impunity. Nasser threatened the Soviets that if they did not bail him out, he would resign in favor of a pro-American regime and the USSR would lose its substantial investment in Egypt. Faced with this choice the Soviets for the first time sent their forces "en masse into the thick of war in the Third World."⁸

Five years later, the Soviets financed, armed, and provided logistical support for the Cuban intervention on behalf of the MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola). Ultimately, some 20,000 Cubans entered the conflict. In the face of this massive deployment, Zairean and South African forces supporting rival contenders for power withdrew, and the MPLA established itself as the government of Angola. In 1977-78, the Soviets assisted in the mounting of a Cuban intervention to eject Somalian forces from the Ethiopian Ogaden. Soviet staff officers took on overall command of Cuban-Ethiopian joint military operations against

Somalia. In 1979, the Soviet Union sent some 85,000 troops into Afghanistan to salvage the vanguard party regime while removing its leader. In conjunction with this activism in policy, Soviet commentary on the Third World once again displayed far greater optimism concerning prospects for revolution and development in the direction of socialism.

There were at least four causes for this change in Soviet policy. First, a number of tempting opportunities for Soviet expansion appeared in the early and mid-1970s. The first was Angola. Portugal, unlike the other colonial powers, had sought to hold on to its colonial possessions in spite of the growth of nationalist and anti-colonial sentiment in Africa. In the early 1960s, a number of liberation movements emerged to contest Portuguese control in Guinea-Bissau, Angola and Mozambique. Though the movements in the Portuguese African territories met with varying degrees of military success, the combined impact of three colonial wars was more than Portugal could bear. By the early 1970s, defense expenditures made up more than half of the annual budget. Large numbers of young Portuguese men sought refuge abroad in order to avoid military service.

In 1974, a movement of younger radical officers seized power in Lisbon with the intent of extricating Portugal from its colonial entanglements. The new Portuguese regime quickly stated its desire to grant independence to the colonies in Africa. In Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau, the transition went comparatively smoothly. In each case a single movement had emerged as a clear successor. The situation was different in Angola. The struggle against Portugal had been waged by three ethnically distinct movements — the FNLA (The Front for the National Liberation of Angola), the MPLA, and UNITA (the Union for the Total Independence of Angola) — who spent as much time fighting each other as they did battling the Portuguese. The MPLA had developed a special relationship with the USSR and Cuba in the mid-1960s. Despite their differences, the three movements had come together in January, 1975, to form a coalition government for the transition. But as independence approached, the government broke apart and the three movements resumed open warfare among themselves. The ensuing chaos provided an opening for Soviet and Cuban intervention on behalf of the MPLA, just as it tempted the United States, China and South Africa into supporting the MPLA's rivals.

During the same period, the Ethiopian monarchy finally fell to pieces. The regime had faced growing ethnic separatist insurgencies in the Ogaden, Eritrea and Tigre, discontent among the emergent urban working and middle classes, and serious famine in several regions. Its incapacity to cope with these simultaneous threats and the gradual deterioration of the economic and security situation in the country led to unrest in the armed forces. In 1974, junior officers led a coup.

6 "Vysshii internatsional'nyi dolg stran sotsializma," *Pravda* (October 27, 1965).

7 R. Legvold, "The Soviet Union's changing view of Sub-Saharan Africa," in W.R. Duncan, ed., *Soviet Policy in Developing Countries* (London: Ginn-Blaisdell, 1970), p.74; M. Schwartz, "The USSR and leftist regimes in the Third World," *Survey* XIX (1973), #3, p.241.

8 R. Menon, *Soviet Power and the Third World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p.9.

The leftward tilt of the new military regime coupled with evidence of serious human rights abuses caused the cessation of military assistance from the US, historically Ethiopia's principal supplier. Meanwhile, the need for such help to cope with mounting insurgent threats and impending intervention by Somalia grew more urgent. This created an opening for the USSR in the most populous state in the Horn of Africa.

In Afghanistan, the 1978 Saur Revolution brought to power the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, a group dedicated to the socialist transformation of Afghan society and which had enjoyed close ties to the USSR. This created an opportunity to considerably deepen Soviet involvement in a border state. The Soviets took advantage of the regime's weakness to expand their presence in the country and then found themselves trapped in a situation they could not control.

The second cause for Soviet expansionism in the 1970s was the atrophy in American military power and will to compete with the USSR in the Third World. This weakened what had been an important constraint on Soviet activism. In short, the risks perceived by the USSR in exploiting opportunities had diminished.

Third, China reemerged from self-imposed isolation in the early 1970s to once again contest Soviet influence over national liberation revolutions and Afro-Asian states. The Chinese denied the Soviet Union's status as a revolutionary actor in the international system and as a friend of the Third World states. At the time, the USSR was particularly vulnerable to these accusations, since Moscow was pursuing a deepening process of détente with the United States. The China factor pushed the USSR to a degree of compensatory activism as a means of proving itself as the leading force in the global revolutionary process.

Fourth, the USSR had spent considerable effort in the 1960s and early 1970s building up its capacity to project force at a distance from Soviet borders. Although Soviet force projection capabilities remained inferior in most categories to those of the United States, they nonetheless had developed the capability to influence events that they had not previously possessed.⁹

Doctrinal Change in the 1980s

Much water has passed under the bridge since the invasion of Afghanistan. Brezhnev has passed from the scene, as have his two successors. The interregnum was a period of substantial uncertainty, when more sophisticated and pessimistic perspectives on the Third World competed with

holdovers from the 1970s. Since Gorbachev's accession to power in April, 1985, Soviet attitudes and policy towards the Third World appear to be entering a definable new phase.

First of all, there has been a dramatic diminution in official comment on the Third World.¹⁰ When officials do comment on it, they pay far less attention to revolutionary movements and radical states. Instead, their focus has once again shifted to the large, intrinsically important countries of the Third World. In discussing ties with such states, Soviet commentators focus on the construction of economic ties of mutual benefit rather than on anti-imperialist solidarity. This is an element of a broader recognition of interdependence between capitalist and socialist economic systems.

When they do talk about their socialist-oriented clients, they tend to be far more critical and less sanguine than previously about prospects for evolution in the direction of socialism.¹¹ The development process of socialist-oriented states now rests principally on the shoulders of the vanguard party regimes, the USSR assisting "only to the extent of its abilities." As in the mid-1960s, Soviet writers stress that the principal revolutionary responsibility of the USSR lies in the modernization of the Soviet economy.¹² They recognize that their Third World clients remain a part of the international capitalist economy and that the USSR is not in a position to offer a viable alternative. Many Soviet writers are now willing to accept that, if properly controlled, foreign private capital can contribute to the development process.

There are fewer official expressions of willingness to provide military assistance in defending Third World revolutions or in making new ones. Revolutionary movements and regimes are counselled to defend themselves. The conflicts they are involved in — far from being an essential aspect of the global transition to socialism — are now delinked explicitly from the global struggle between the two social systems.¹³ Soviet analysts have downplayed the role of the West in stimulating conflicts and instead tend to focus on local sources of tension. This is one part of a broader trend in Soviet analysis towards taking non-class factors such as religion, ethnicity and nationalism more seriously.

Soviet commentary on Third World conflicts displays a heavy preoccupation with their destructive and destabilizing character — both in the regional and global contexts — and the need to search for political rather than military solutions to tensions in the Third World. The impression one gets here is that Soviet experts have come to see the Third World as far more complex and dangerous terrain than they had previously thought.

These new and more realistic perspectives suggest in the

9 See R. Menon, p.104.

10 Compare, for example, Brezhnev's speech to the 25th Party Congress in 1976 with Gorbachev's to the 27th in 1987. The first appears in *Pravda* (February 25, 1976). The second is in *Pravda* (February 26, 1987).

11 See, for example, G. Mirskii, "K voprosu o vybore puti i orientatsii razvivayushchikhsya stran," *Mirovaya Ekonomika i Mezhdunarodnye Otnoshenia* (1987), #5, pp.70-81.

12 See the newest version of the CPSU party program, as printed in *Pravda* (March 7, 1986), and Gorbachev's speech to the 27th Party Congress, as cited in note 10. Both use phraseology identical to that adopted by Andropov in June, 1983. See his speech to the Central Committee Plenum, as reprinted in *Kommunist* (1983), #9.

13 See "Gorbachev's post-summit press conference," *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* (December 18, 1985), p.12.

first place a reduction in the priority accorded Third World issues by Soviet policy-makers. They now appreciate that it is not as easy as they may have thought to achieve concrete and durable gains there at Western expense, and that the politics of the regions are considerably more complicated than they assumed. Reduced comment on the Soviet role in the Third World suggests growing skepticism about the cost-benefit ratio and concern about the capacity of the USSR to carry the "burdens of empire." The advocacy of restraint in and peaceful resolution of conflicts may indicate some disillusionment with the use of force as an instrument of policy, along with an awareness of the damage that competitive behavior in the Third World may do to the central superpower relationship. Comment on crisis management suggests an interest in exploring collaborative diplomatic approaches.

The growing focus on economically important, newly industrialized countries reflects a desire to diversify Soviet initiatives away from radical regimes and towards more substantial states, whatever their ideological orientation, and to shift from arms transfers and intervention to trade and investment. Many of these changes are reminiscent of the mid-1960s, when Western analysts predicted a coming period of moderation and pragmatism in policy.

Personnel Change

These shifts in Soviet thinking have been accompanied by important changes among personnel with policy-making responsibility. Two institutions are relevant, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the International Department of the Communist Party's Central Committee. Both have experienced substantial turnover since Gorbachev came to power in 1985. The International Department — with important responsibilities in advising the Politburo and implementing party policy vis-a-vis ideologically kindred groups outside the socialist camp — had been dominated since Stalin's death by a coterie of rigid proponents of radical activism in the Third World. These people, among them Boris Ponomarev and Rostislav Ul'yanovsky, have departed the scene; their patron, Mikhail Suslov, is dead. The new head of the department is Anatolii Dobrynin, long the USSR's ambassador to the United States. His principal assistant is Georgii Korniyenko, another Americanist from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This means that the principal organ dealing with revolutionary issues abroad is now dominated by professional diplomats who are aware of American sensitivities to Soviet activism in the Third World. These changes appear to reflect a deliberate effort at the highest level to ensure that Soviet policy in the Third World should be responsive to the principal concern of the USSR in foreign affairs — the relationship with the United States. Turnover in the department has also brought to the fore Karen Brutents, who has long dis-

played considerable skepticism about the tilt of Soviet policy towards revolutionary movements and regimes and a preference for developing trade and diplomatic ties with strategically and economically important states.¹⁴

Changes in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have paralleled those in the International Department. Those with a background in American affairs have done particularly well here too, most notably First Deputy Minister Yuliy Vorontsov. More to the point, many of the deputy ministers dealing with Third World affairs have Americanist backgrounds. Vorontsov, for example, has partial responsibility for the Middle East, while another official with US expertise, Viktor Komplektov, handles Latin America. Again, the evidence suggests a desire to make the USSR's policy in the Third World more responsive to Soviet-American concerns. Lower down in the hierarchy, the Soviets appear to be appointing more individuals with country expertise to ambassadorial postings.

This is not equivalent to neglect of, or diffidence towards the Third World. Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, unlike his predecessor Andrei Gromyko, shows considerable interest in Third World matters. To judge from his travel, however, his focus seems to be on economically developed states.

Policy Towards Capitalist States

Soviet policy in the Gorbachev era is striking for the quantity — and in certain instances the substance — of initiatives towards major non-socialist states in the Third World. Moscow's diplomatic calendar has been punctuated since 1985 by frequent visits on the part of foreign ministers and heads of state from the likes of Argentina, Brazil and Mexico. During the same period Shevardnadze has travelled to Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Thailand. By contrast, longstanding allies such as Angola, Vietnam, Ethiopia and Nicaragua tend to be ignored in the wanderings of top foreign policy officials.

Perhaps the most striking element of this trend in Soviet foreign policy has been the accelerated cultivation of India. Gorbachev has met with Rajiv Gandhi four times since 1984. India is the only Third World state to which Gorbachev has paid a state visit. He did not arrive empty handed. In addition to signing agreements deepening the Indo-Soviet military supply and technology-transfer relationship, Gorbachev committed 1.5 billion rubles of credit to India. This supplements the 1 billion rubles extended a year earlier during Rajiv's visit to Moscow. Both contrast rather starkly with the 900 million rubles extended over the entire previous thirty years of Soviet-Indian economic relations.¹⁵ It would appear from the evidence available thus far that Soviet relations with "regional powers" have taken on a new salience and urgency

14 For an account of Karen Brutents' thinking on these issues, see F. Fukuyama, *Moscow's Post-Brezhnev Reassessment of the Third World*, RAND/R3337-USDP (Santa Monica, CA: The Rand Corporation, 1986), pp. 36-38.

15 See D. Mukerjee, "Indo-Soviet Economic Ties," *Problems of Communism*, January-February, 1987, p.13.

in their policy in the Third World. Soviet spokesmen characterize the development of the relationship with India as a model for ties with other non-socialist states in the Third World.

This trend affects Soviet relations not only with major industrial powers, it is also evident in Soviet diplomacy with conservative Middle Eastern oil producers. Prior to Gorbachev, the USSR had relations only with Kuwait. In 1985, they were recognized by Oman and the United Arab Emirates. Some movement was also apparent with Saudi Arabia when the Saudi oil minister visited Moscow last year.

Policy Towards the States of Socialist Orientation

By contrast, despite published evidence of Soviet disillusionment with the socialist-oriented states, Soviet military assistance to clients beset by civil unrest or external military pressure has continued and on occasion has grown. Offensives in Afghanistan increased markedly after Gorbachev assumed power. Rather than remaining content to hold the major cities and control the principal lines of communication, Soviet units took the war to the insurgents. Well-trained special forces and airborne personnel have mounted frequent ambushes deep inside rebel-held territory. Their forces have made far more concerted efforts to cut *mujahedin* lines of communication to sanctuaries in Pakistan. The Soviets have also increased military pressure on Pakistan itself.

Elsewhere, the USSR has increased arms deliveries to Angola and has assisted the Angolans in mounting two major offensives against UNITA in the south of the country since 1985. This has occurred despite Angola's reduced capacity to pay for arms resulting from the drop in oil prices. In other words, the USSR has taken on a significant additional burden. More recently, reports indicate that after a long period of apparent indifference, the USSR is contemplating the expansion of military assistance to Mozambique. Soviet representatives have also been negotiating with Zimbabwe on the possible sale of MiG-29 fighters to assist in the defense of Zimbabwean air space against South African incursions.

The USSR continues to show itself willing to intervene directly in the internal politics of client regimes to maintain its influence and presence. In January, 1986, the South Yemeni government collapsed in the midst of violent factional fighting. Rather than letting the cards fall where they may, the Soviets and Cubans intervened in favor of the rebel faction seeking the ouster of President Ali Nasir Muhammad. Soviet vessels supplied rebel units with ammunition, while Soviet and Cuban officers directed rebel artillery fire. Some reports refer to bombing of South Yemeni airfields by Soviet-piloted aircraft in order to neutralize the local air force, which backed the incumbent.¹⁶ It would appear that developments

in Soviet thinking, therefore, have had little impact on military policy towards these states.

Given the character of the issues at stake, however, this is not surprising. The Soviet literature suggests that much of the community of analysts and policy-makers has lost its enthusiasm for ties with these states. But abandonment of allies in trouble would raise questions about the credibility of Soviet commitments. This is particularly true in instances — as in Afghanistan, Angola and Nicaragua — where the United States is an indirect participant in the challenge to Soviet allies. Moscow perceives Soviet status as a global power to be tightly linked to their positions in these countries.

These international factors may be connected to domestic political ones. Gorbachev and his supporters are attempting an ambitious domestic program which could alienate significant portions of the Soviet elite and public. Because he is vulnerable, Gorbachev has good reason to avoid the impression of weakness in foreign policy. The surrender of positions previously established at considerable expense would provide powerful ammunition to his adversaries.

In a number of other ways, new perspectives on Third World alliances and conflicts have impinged on policy. The Soviets, for example, have placed significant pressure on allies who face civil unrest and insurgent opposition — such as Angola, Ethiopia, Nicaragua, Afghanistan and Vietnam — to solve these problems through a process of political settlement and "national reconciliation." They have pushed the Ethiopian government into sporadic talks with Eritrean insurgents. Soviet representatives have counselled the Afghan government to broaden the base of their regime and have contemplated inviting the king back from exile to resume his position as head of state. The Vietnamese-backed Kampuchean regime is currently involved in talks with Prince Sihanouk in order to explore the prospects for a peaceful resolution of that country's civil war. The Soviets have expressed strong verbal support for the Contadora process and the Arias Plan. Given that Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega's radical reversal on talks with the Contras followed immediately after a visit to Moscow to request further economic and military assistance, it is at least plausible that the Soviets pushed him in that direction. Finally, Gorbachev himself recently declared in the presence of Syrian President Assad that there could be no military solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict and that it was unnatural that there were no diplomatic relations between the USSR and Israel.

Thus far, however, the Soviets have been unwilling to risk losing clients by pressuring them into agreements with internal opposition movements or regional rivals. These regimes, realizing that the Soviets will not abandon them, have little incentive to take counsels of moderation seriously, since they know that in the last analysis it is unlikely that the USSR will let them fall.

16 For an account of the Yemeni coup and Soviet reactions to it, see David Pollock, "Moscow and Aden: Coping with a Coup," *Problems of Communism*, May-June, 1986.

The Soviets have also made some effort to push their clients towards more efficient economic performance. It was in the aftermath of Politburo member Igor Ligachev's visit to Hanoi that the highly orthodox gerontocracy running the Vietnamese Workers' Party gave way to reformist sentiment and the party accepted a substantial reform of the economy. There are reports that the USSR has sought to reduce the burden of empire by pushing its allies to seek alternatives to dependence on Soviet assistance. Early this year, for example, the Soviets apparently squeezed Nicaraguan oil supplies in the hope that regional producers such as Venezuela and Mexico would pick up the slack.¹⁷ Here too, however, they are unwilling to press too hard. In the case of Nicaragua, when alternatives sources of supply failed to emerge, the USSR increased its shipments and they are now running at a level exceeding that of 1986.

Although there is evidence of adjustment at the margin in Soviet policy towards socialist and socialist-oriented allies, it is difficult to document any major shifts. The USSR appears unwilling to jeopardize these relationships through excessive pressure. Given the constraints, this is not particularly surprising. Where one might expect change is in the Soviet response to new opportunities rather than in existing relationships. One striking aspect of recent Soviet policy in the Third World is the lack of new interventions in the aftermath of Afghanistan.

Soviet Restraint in New Opportunities

It is hard to tell whether the Soviets have given up on the aggressive use of force. Could it be that they have had few opportunities in the 1980s as attractive as those of Angola, Ethiopia, Afghanistan and Nicaragua were in the 1970s?

There are a number of difficulties with this notion. A closer look at the opportunities of the 1970s suggests that most of them had problems. In Angola, despite the longevity of the relationship between the Soviets and MPLA, there was considerable tension between the two. The USSR had distanced itself from the organization in 1973-74 as a result of the group's inefficiency and disagreements with its leader, Agostinho Neto. When Soviet assistance resumed in the late summer or early fall of 1974, the MPLA was by no means the strongest party among those fighting for power. In Ethiopia, when the USSR began to support the regime in December, 1976, the country and its central government were in an advanced state of decay. It was questionable whether the government could survive, even with Soviet assistance.

In and of themselves, these two opportunities seem no better than those proffered by unrest in the Philippines, factional strife in Chad or the ethnic and political tension in Pakistan. But in current instances, Soviet involvement has been small.

Instead of using force to take advantage of regional crises, the Soviets are showing an increasing policy interest in exploring political and diplomatic options. This has brought significant departures from traditional Soviet positions. For example, the USSR is now contemplating the possibility of restoring relations with Israel as an avenue leading to the convening of a Middle East peace conference. After repeated meetings in New York, Paris and Helsinki between personnel of the two foreign ministries, a Soviet consular delegation has been dispatched to Israel. Meanwhile, the Hungarians and the Poles have both opened diplomatic interest sections there. On the Persian Gulf, the USSR supported Security Council Resolution 598, calling for a cease-fire. Initially, the Soviets were reluctant to move forward with their resolution designed to implement 598 for fear of alienating Iran. More recently, however, they have expressed a willingness to collaborate in efforts to impose an arms embargo. They have also proposed a UN naval force to protect freedom of navigation in the Gulf. In general, they have displayed a dramatic increase in interest in the role of the United Nations peacekeeping force as a means of containing and possibly resolving Third World conflicts. Here they have matched their words with their checkbook, paying millions of dollars of arrears in their contributions quota for peacekeeping operations.

In South Africa, Soviet enthusiasm for armed struggle has considerably diminished. They stress instead the necessity of broadly-based compromises embracing and respecting the rights of all peoples in South Africa, including whites.¹⁸ Meanwhile, the Angolans have dropped their earlier insistence that Namibian independence could not be linked to the presence of Cuban forces in Angola.

Current Soviet policy in the Third World has a number of characteristics which distinguish it from the pre-Gorbachev period. The Soviet Union seems more interested today in preserving previous gains than in pursuing new opportunities to expand the positions of socialism. Although it remains committed to military support for its clients where necessary, it is systematically investigating alternatives to a reliance on force in sustaining them. Elsewhere in the Third World, Soviet policy seems to be emphasizing non-military tactics to a far greater degree. The USSR seems increasingly interested in exploring relations of mutual benefit with states of varying ideological orientation. In short, the activism of the 1970s seems to have been followed by a period of consolidation, pragmatic realism and caution.

The Durability of Change

Will these changes endure? The cyclical character of previous Soviet behavior in the Third World, with periods of optimism and activism followed by ones of pessimism and

17 See P. Hanson, "Is Moscow putting pressure on Managua?," *Radio Liberty Research Bulletin* RL 224/87 (June 12, 1987), pp.1-3.

18 See Joe Slovo, "Krizis aparteida neobratim," *Kommunist* (1987), #5, pp.114-15; and Gleb Starushenko's remarks as cited in *Front File Southern African Brief*, May 2, 1987.

quiescence, suggests that we should not expect today's pleasant atmosphere to persist. A number of the sources of this moderation are not necessarily permanent. Soviet restraint is in part a product of renewed American activism and unpredictability in the Third World and the consequently higher risks from adventurism. American support for insurgent movements in Nicaragua, Angola, Afghanistan and Kampuchea has placed the USSR on the defensive. Ironically, Moscow now finds itself defending the status quo against American-sponsored revolutionary challenges. More generally, the US defense buildup places pressure on Soviet resources. This in turn reduces Soviet enthusiasm for taking on new commitments elsewhere. The current economic difficulties of the USSR and the attempt to marshal available resources for thorough internal reform reinforce this effect.

All of these restraining factors are impermanent. The US could abandon its defense buildup. It could return to its previous diffidence concerning the defense of interests in the Third World, dropping the Reagan Doctrine of support for anti-communist "freedom fighters." The Soviet economic situation may well improve. To this extent, one might expect the current period to be followed by a resumption of forceful expansion.

Yet the changes are also based on more lasting factors. The USSR has accumulated a considerable amount of bitter and disillusioning experience in the Third World. Doubts about the prospects of socialist and socialist-orientated states and the wisdom of an exclusive focus on them in Soviet policy are a product of a decade of dealing with the incompetence and irascibility of their leaders, the failure of their development efforts, and the incapacity of their governments to stabilize power and win over their own populations. The economies of Ethiopia, Angola, Mozambique and Nicaragua are on the edge of collapse, or over that edge. So-called "vanguard parties" are often thin veneers overlaying longstanding factional disputes. The Angolan, Ethiopian, Afghan and Kampuchean regimes have all failed to mobilize and sustain broad popular support.

Recognition of the significance of ethnicity, nationalism and religion shows that the Soviets have learned from past errors of underestimating these forces. The USSR completely misunderstood the nature and significance of the Iranian Revolution because of their failure to appreciate the role of religion. They did not realize in 1976-77 that their embrace of Ethiopia would probably cause the defection of Somalia and the loss of the naval base at Berbera because of the animosity dividing the Somali and Amharic peoples in the Horn of Africa.

The Soviets are increasingly aware of the damage that may be done to Soviet-American relations as a result of competition in the Third World. This recognition also stems from events of the 1970s: intervention in Angola delegitimized détente, the Soviet role in Ethiopia delayed the signing of

SALT II and the invasion of Afghanistan killed the treaty altogether.

Moreover, Gorbachev's recognition of these factors is not a sudden change but the end result of long study and debate. Soviet academics and officials who have criticized past policies have been among the principal beneficiaries of personnel change in the institutes, in the International Department of the Central Committee and in the Foreign Ministry. Their major adversaries have died or been shunted aside. The thinking of this newly prominent group is likely to affect Soviet policy for years to come. To this extent, the current direction of Soviet policy may endure.

Nonetheless, one must ask finally just how viable this new Soviet strategy is. It is all very well to seek to expand economic ties with more developed Third World states. But what is the USSR going to sell? Moscow already suffers a chronic trade deficit with major Latin American states such as Argentina and Brazil. Given their technological level, these countries have no real interest in purchasing Soviet manufactured goods. It is one thing to extend credits to India, but what are they going to be used for? Unless there is a quick and effective reform of the Soviet economy, little will come of this aspect of the policy.

In the area of conflict resolution, it is difficult to engage the United States in collaborative efforts to shore up established Soviet interests — as in Afghanistan — when the price the Americans are demanding is the surrender of those interests. Even if the two nations were able to agree on bilateral approaches to the management of conflict in the Third World, there is no guarantee that they could convince regional allies to go along. The Iraqs, Syrias, Israels, South Africas and Nicaraguas have agendas of their own which do not necessarily coincide with those of the superpowers and which may give them a stake in sabotaging peace efforts. One must also ask just how much success the Soviets could bear, since their influence with Third World allies rests largely on military assistance.

The dearth of Soviet options in the Third World other than the military one indicates that their new approach may go nowhere. This would leave the USSR with the choice of accepting its irrelevance or reasserting itself through the use of force.

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